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Mexico will not deport Iraqi Christians

Reuters (23.09.2000)/ HRWF International Secretariat (25.09.2000) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - Email: info@hrwf.net - The Mexican government said Friday it would not deport 136 Iraqi Christians holed up in a Tijuana hotel, fearing death in their homeland for their beliefs and awaiting word on their bid for asylum in the United States as religious refugees.

The members of the Chaldean Christian sect have been in the hotel since midweek, detained by Mexican immigration officials after entering the country illegally in hopes of crossing into the United States.

"Mexico will not make them return to their country of origin, since there are sufficient elements to suppose that they are persecuted for their religion in Iraq," Mexico's Interior Ministry said in a statement released late Friday.

"Mexico, faithful to its tradition of asylum and refuge, opens the possibility of accepting the Iraqis in our country on humanitarian grounds and in protection of their individual rights," the statement said.

Earlier in the day, the Iraqis pressed handwritten signs against the hotel window pleading not to be deported. They have refused to leave the hotel for fear of being shipped back to Iraq.

Mexican authorities said Thursday the Iraqis numbered 126, but Friday they raised it to 136.

After journeying to Tijuana Friday and meeting with local officials, international human rights authorities, the U.S. consul general and the group of Iraqis, Deputy Minister for Immigrant Services Jose Angel Pescador Osuna said he expected the United States to decide soon on the Iraqis' petition for asylum.

Pescador Osuna told the group that Mexican authorities considered them undocumented but not criminals, and guaranteed them respect for their human rights.

He also offered special care for 20 children, 22 elderly people and two pregnant women in the group, the Interior Ministry said. The group was allowed to stay in 40 rooms of the

hotel because authorities worried the children and elderly would not tolerate conditions in an official holding center.

Seventy-seven Iraqis who earlier made the border crossing have been detained or questioned by U.S. immigration officials.

Over the years, members of the Chaldean Christian minority have fled Iraq seeking a better life and religious freedom.

Many had settled in the San Diego, California area, now home to one of the largest Chaldean communities in the United States, said the Rev. Michael Bazzi, pastor at St. Peter Chaldean Catholic Church in El Cajon, California, near San Diego.

Mexico shares a 2,100-mile border with the United States and is a major route for migrants trying to enter its northern neighbor.

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Iraqi Christians seek asylum in United States

Seventy-seven Iraqi Christians have made a mass bid for asylum, Reuters reported

ZENIT (22.09.2000)/ HRWF International Secretariat (25.09.2000) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - Email: info@hrwf.net - The 77, seeking asylum in this country and claiming they could be killed if they were sent home, were being questioned or detained by U.S. immigration officials after crossing the Mexican border here, Reuters reported.

Up to 126 other Iraqi members of the Chaldean Christian sect were holed up in a hotel in nearby Tijuana, Mexico, after American officials alerted their Mexican counterparts that they were there and possibly preparing a border crossing.

A spokesman for Mexico's National Immigration Institute said Thursday that the Iraqis were detained among a group of about 150 would-be illegal immigrants staying in a Tijuana hotel and that six "polleros," or immigrant smugglers, had also been arrested. The rest of the migrants were from Central America.

U.S. officials said that the Iraqis detained at the border Wednesday identified themselves as Chaldean Catholics, descendants of an ancient Mesopotamian Christian culture who make up about 1% of mainly Muslim Iraq.

The Rev. Michael Bazzi, pastor at the St. Peter Chaldean Catholic Church in El Cajon, Calif., near San Diego, said that 40 of those who were being questioned by the U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service were released late Thursday.

He said that the 126 staying at the hotel were being questioned by the Mexican authorities and hoped to be released to cross the border. At that point, they would face questioning by U.S. immigration officers.

Bazzi said that over the years members of the Chaldean Christian minority have fled Iraq seeking a better life and religious freedom. Many have settled in the San Diego area, now home to one of the largest Chaldean communities in the United States, Bazzi said.